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MELVIN VAN PEEBLES

GONE FISHING

I THINK I'M BETTER OFF NOT SOCIALIZING. I MAKE A
BETTER IMPRESSION IF I'M NOT AROUND.

—CHRISTOPHER WALKEN

If you took three zeroes off Melvin Van Peebles's income, divided his fame factor by about five, and ignored skin color, he and Mike were not unlike. About the same age, they had both been involved with words and music, and with the world known as "hip," and both of them had fathered sons with French mothers.

Mike met Melvin during rehearsals for the musical review *Melvin Van Peebles et Ses Potes* (and His Pals), which he had cast, and was directing, choreographing, singing, and starring in. "I shoot the breeze between numbers," he explained. "Sort of like Charles Aznavour." Van Peebles did not suffer from stage fright.

The review featured him singing his own songs and gospel and rhythm and blues adaptations of the songs of the neglected nineteenth-century cabaret artist Aristide Bruant. This one performance in the *Café de la Danse* would be the end of it. Van Peebles harbored secret hopes for a subsequent Broadway run, but the odds were against it, and, anyway, he did not need the money. "I don't

have a mistress and I don't have a car," he said. "As Thoreau said, you're rich in relation to what your needs are."

Mike's mortgage had been paid off. He felt like a millionaire spending up to a hundred dollars, like part of the middle class up to a thousand dollars, and over that he was definitely poor. He was retired every day until noon. Although he could buy a Saab, it would break him. The concept of low overhead is more upscale in the wide world of talking pictures, in which Van Peebles is best known. What was considered Robert Altman's down-and-out period in Paris in the nineties included a chauffeur-driven sedan, entertaining in expensive restaurants, and a stylish Left Bank apartment around the corner from François Mitterrand.

Perhaps he did not have a mistress or a car, but Van Peebles maintained residences in New York, Los Angeles, and Paris. He had risen to the level of what was called an "iconic presence" after he produced, directed, starred in, and wrote the music for *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, a movie about a black man on the run after killing two white policemen. It was dedicated to "all the brothers and sisters who have had enough of The Man." Bill Cosby loaned him fifty thousand dollars, and eventually the movie grossed more than fourteen million. Nevertheless, Van Peebles was not particularly proud to be credited with spawning Hollywood's "blaxploitation" trend. "The term really has nothing to do with me," he said. "It has a derogatory sense to it. Everybody tries to keep us in our place with these limiting labels."

While a student at Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware, Ohio, the future "godfather of black film" was, he recalled, "once sent to Coventry." He had had an attitude problem: "The right people on the campus boycotted me. But, you know, I felt sorry for them being denied my company." Obviously, the problem was their attitude not his. Now he was writing another novel—his thirteenth

book—on speculation. “If the manuscript is rejected,” he said, “the way I look at it, it will be the publisher being stupid.”

Mike felt any rejection to be well deserved. Rejection was to be expected rather than a surprise. He would credit his unsure grasp of reality. Perhaps his writing had not been clear, or commercial, enough. Or a sloppy manuscript—formatting counts. The possibility of the problem being that the publisher was stupid would not occur to him. His fear of rejection became self-perpetuating, attracting more rejection. Whereas Van Peebles’s confidence was so strong that if a girl he was courting turned him down, he would be sure that “she’s an obvious lesbian.”

Having the crown of his head shaved one rainy morning on Rue de la Roquette, Mike heard Bob Marley’s “No Woman No Cry” on the coiffeur’s radio. He’d never understood the lyrics before, not that he’d tried very hard. Treating pop lyrics as deep metaphysical truths was really dumb. However, the idea of “no woman no rejection” made sense to him. One of the positive things—maybe the only thing—about being over seventy was that it was possible to admire female architecture without a cool-destroying, rejection-risking erection. Old age was a voyeur’s paradise. Were young women aware that they were all beautiful? Was Mike aware of that when he was young? Were they all beautiful when he was young? One way or another, it felt good to be free of them. Remembering women he had had may in fact have been better than having them.

Van Peebles’s macho self-certainty was in part a number—some sort of “bad brother” shtick. The self-confidence was real enough, though the macho was at least partly faux. He dared you to look behind the social roles it amused him to play. The characters were tempered by the sweetness of the “bad” intonation of his speech, and by the ironic twinkle behind black-rimmed Harold Lloyd eyeglasses under the pulled-down visor of a 1930s James Cagney gang-

ster cap. With his grandfatherly gray beard, laid back hipster manner, and wide frame of reference, Van Peebles reminded Mike of Melvin's fellow icon the late Slim Gaillard. Melvin placed a respectful hand over his heart at the mention of Slim's name.

You may have been skeptical when you heard Slim Gaillard say, "I invented the word groovy," but few would have disputed his claim to be the father of the Voutie language, which went something like this: "Voutie oroony macvoosy ohfoosimo." And there is no doubt that he wrote hit songs called "Flat Foot Floogie (With a Floy Floy)" and "Cement Mixer (Putti Putti)." You might have raised your eyebrows when he told you, "There are two pages about me in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*," but there they are: "One night we went to see Slim Gaillard in a Frisco nightclub. Slim Gaillard is a tall, thin Negro with big sad eyes who's always saying 'Right-orooni,' or 'How about a little bourbon-orooni?' In Frisco, great eager crowds of young semi-intellectuals sat at his feet and listened to him on the piano, guitar and bongo drums . . . Now Dean approached him, he approached his God; he thought Slim was God."

When Gaillard was a guest on the Bob Hope radio show, Hope asked his other guest, Marlene Dietrich: "What do you think of Slim Gaillard?" "Vout," she replied. That's a fact; he had it on tape. But now you are forced to take his word: "Ronald Reagan used to come in with Jane Wyman when I was working at Billy Berg's in Hollywood; even Ronald Reagan was saying 'vout.'"

He worked in the speakeasies: "Way before bebop; way, way, far far far before—many many many far before bebop. Al Capone loved musicians. Maybe some of his other activities were undesirable, but he was always very nice to me." There is hard evidence that Gaillard once led a band called Henry Sausage and his Pork Chops ("We fry, man"), and that the sheet music to "Flat Foot

Floogie" went down in the 1939 New York World's Fair time capsule, along with "The Stars and Stripes Forever."

When a theatrical agent told him, "You're just the type I need for a part," Gaillard objected, but not too hard: "I'm a musician not an actor." He ended up with roles in the television series *Marcus Welby, MD*; *Mission Impossible*; *Medical Center*; *Charlie's Angels*; and *Roots* ("I played good guys"). His daughter married Marvin Gaye—Gaillard claps his hands in the background on Gaye's album *Sexual Healing*. Gaye was afraid of flying; he was thinking of canceling a big tour because of it. "I consider you like my dad," he said to Gaillard. "What do you think I should do?" Fortunately, Gaillard was also a hypnotist.

Van Peebles had been a street musician and a journalist in Paris, a portrait painter in Mexico, he studied astronomy in Holland. Gaillard had music publishing companies in London and Los Angeles, he owned fruit orchards near Tacoma and real estate in Miami. Van Peebles was the first African-American trader on the New York Stock Exchange. His book *Bold Money: A New Way to Play the Options Market* was still in print fifteen years later. Van Peebles and Gaillard both had successful careers as businessmen and actors. And they were both veterans of the U.S. Air Force. Gaillard studied hydraulic and electrical systems while with the Tuskegee Airmen, the World War II African-American fighter plane squadron. He used to "practice taking engines apart and putting them back together again day after day using minimum tools and minimum light." Van Peebles was the navigator and only black crew member on a B-47 bomber in Korea. "The other guys all had thick southern accents," he recalled. "But you would have thought I was an albino, the way they treated me. They were unbelievably nice. They'd say, 'Y'all got to come down to our barbecue on Saturday.' Because they knew that if the navigator makes a mistake, everybody dies." Melvin was re-

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mindful of his B-47 crew when both Halle Berry and Denzel Washington won Academy Awards. "Basically they owe their Oscars to Osama Bin Laden," he said. "When Americans are in trouble, suddenly we're all Americans."

Van Peebles could read, write, and speak French; he translated his own books. His telephone answering machine message, in its entirety, went: "*Ouah. À la pêche*" (roughly, "Yeah. Gone fishing"). His French had an African-American accent, which was chic in France. He had been called a one-man conglomerate, an enfant terrible, and a Renaissance man. Van Peebles had just finished acting one of a continuing assortment of character roles—in this case, "a gangster in a movie that doesn't have a name yet."

"I have various arrows in my quiver," he said. He has been called a precursor of rap. Released when that sort of thing was still filed under "spoken word," his album *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death* influenced the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron. Van Peebles's soundtrack music for *Sweetback* was performed by Earth, Wind & Fire, and it became their first album. Jon Pareles reviewed his cabaret act *Br'er Soul and Roadkill* at Manhattan's Fez café in the *New York Times*: "Van Peebles turned rock, pop, Broadway and disco songs into extensions of his own down-home philosophy. As he sees it, most of us are roadkill on the highway of love."

"Roadkill on the highway of love" is just another way to say no woman no cry. Having an almost sort-of ex-wife for a best friend is one way to be with a woman without ever crying about it. Mike managed to cry anyway. He and his buddy Marie-France went to see the Robert Guédiguian movie *Marie-Jo's Two Loves*. Set in Marseille, the film's Mediterranean images are beautiful. Good-looking good actors play deep and mature characters. Marie-Jo, the heroine, cannot make up her mind between her loving husband, who runs a small construction company, and her lover, a virile harbor pilot named, of course, Marco. She is deeply in love with both

of them. Marie-Jo, an attractive, sensual woman of a certain age, mother of a teenage daughter, wears minimal makeup and has had no apparent surgical lifts. Mike really did hate to say anything nice about the French, but he looked at Marie-Jo and thought how well French women age. Marie-Jo and her two lovers say important things to each other in beds and kitchens. She decides to leave her husband and teenage daughter and move in with Marco in his romantic studio overlooking the harbor. Although he had begun to suspect something, her husband, a good, honest, loving man, is totally shot down. Her daughter throws a fit, and screams that she'll never speak to Marie-Jo again. During some dreamy weeks in a lover's paradise overlooking the port, the Frogue bitch (sorry) seems to be content at last. But when Marco goes out of town on a short business trip, she lasts all of two days before returning home to her husband.

In a corner café after the movie, Mike teased Marie-France: "That's a French woman for you. Go out of town for two days and she leaves you." M-F was not in a teasing mood. The way she saw it, the picture was about this deeply romantic and interesting mature woman, and it treated a universal subject sensitively. Obviously, Mike would never understand French women.

To him, it was some sort of Monty Python French-lover skit: "How do you get your *femme* to leave you?"

"Go out of town for two days."

The English are good at making fun of the French. Mike had clipped an article in the *Guardian* that said the French think truffles and Camembert smell like sex. The article said you could probably wave a slice of toast at the French and they'd think it smelled like sex. He read it to her. She did not laugh, which was disappointing, though not unexpected. Marie-France was Mike's only good friend in the city in which he was stuck. The degree of her importance in his life was hard to exaggerate. Every day involved a conscious

effort not to call her. It was embarrassing to keep telephoning your only friend in town. She had a boyfriend, who probably also kept telephoning her. Lately, Mike had been wondering if it might be a good idea to pull away from Marie-France, to become less dependent on her. The idea might be looked at, if you looked at it cross-eyed, as a healthy exercise in letting go. A way to lighten the load, get rid of earthly burdens, and so on. We die alone, and if Mike was already alone, there would be less to lose. Some sick shit.

He had been letting friends go one after the other, a string of them, over a period of years. The dying alone justification came after the fact, it was not premeditated. Maybe it was his friends' fault, though he doubted it. It had been an extended social decrecendo leading up to that inevitable big fermata in the sky. His revolutionary pal Sal was tough, smart, and intense, and he had one wild eye and his cheeks were always stubbled. His father had been a colonel in the Republican army during the Spanish Civil War. Sal had taken tea at the Coupole with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. He knew Huey Newton and Carlos Fuentes. When not teaching university students how to tear down the system, Sal speculated with Left Bank real estate. He borrowed the money from fellow revolutionaries like de Beauvoir. The excitement of waiting until the last minute to pay them back gave him a rush (he did not do drugs). Sal asked Mike to lend him twenty large. Mike was living off interest, and Sal considered interest reactionary. One definition of a counterrevolutionary is someone who won't lend money to a revolutionary. Then there was Artie, who ran an ad agency in Paris. Artie invited Mike for weekends at his big country house in Champagne, in the woods an hour north-east of Paris. Both of them loved jazz and they could talk about it for hours. Then, one night, Artie wanted to put on a record by a country singer he said was different from the others. Mike said please don't. Artie put it on anyway. Mike liked Willie Nelson as

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well as anybody, but he was feeling pushed. His sickly sensitive shit-detector went off, and he heard himself tell Artie to go fuck himself. It went back and forth like that for a while, and neither one of them ever made an effort to make up.

Mike's long leakage of friends was also due to his having moved around so widely and often. Or his friends had moved. Or he or they started or stopped taking one drug or another. Marie-France suspected that it had something to do with a competitive vibe Mike threw out without realizing it, and then got caught up in. After being at a festival in Switzerland for four days, he returned, and there was not one message on his answering machine. It may have been a bit extreme, but it was not really surprising. Mike could be awkward, passive, grumpy on the telephone. Melvin Van Peebles probably got messages like *des petits pains*. Normal people keep their friends, and go on making them. Melvin certainly returned phone calls, and probably went out of his way to be friendly and cooperative. Most folks must be like that. In part, it depends on the definition of a friend. People tend to promote acquaintances. Having a large number of friends is important to them—it's a sort of social greed, quantity over quality, immediate satisfaction; similar to a CEO's obsession with a fat quarterly bottom line at all costs. One thing was sure; Melvin Van Peebles was friendlier than Mike.

The idea for the Van Peebles and His Pals musical review was born when he was invited to a film festival in Nantes. He thanked them for thinking of him, but said he didn't have a film that year. "No, you don't understand," the festival's director replied: "We want you to be the entertainment." Having nothing better to do at the moment, and being "too short to play basketball and too nervous to steal," he took out the sing-dance-plenty-hot arrow from his quiver and cast six young Nantais singers and dancers to be his *potes*. Leaving them some demos before a fast business trip to Los Angeles, he told them to "get as close as possible to the arrange-

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ments." When he came back, he was more than impressed: "Oh, man, man, man, man, man! These people are terrific. They are so talented and positive. They really want to do it the right way. Like Quincy Jones says: 'You've got to leave room for God in these things.' For once God got it right."

Mike thought that maybe, God willing, he'd made a new friend. He and Melvin thought along the same lines, had comparable heroes, and they seemed to like each other. It was agreed that it would be nice to get together again. When Mike picked up the receiver and punched out Melvin's number, the answering machine said that he'd gone fishing. Mike left a message suggesting dinner, but Melvin never returned the call.

Barbershops & Whorehouses XV

I've had it. I've been here too long. You have to follow the music. This expat thing is over.

—Steve Lacy, before moving to Boston after thirty years in Paris.